

*“Huevooooos!”*

The call from a fan, and Mike hits his animatronic response. Smile, show off that mouth full of sunshine yellow gold. Fist to chest. Chuck them deuces. Doesn't matter that it feels false, that it all feels a bit...empty, right now.

Mike would never let it show, but he's been out of sorts for a bit.

Losses don't normally eat him up though, so he's been keeping his head down, marching forward. Smoke up, look fresh, let 'em see that bigger cuban link that you've gotten to make yourself even more distinct. Let them see that you're running those Jae Tips Saucony Grids as daily drivers even though they set you back half a rack. Post on IG. New Santa Muerte tattoo. Splitting time between Queens and The Strip.

There's part of the guy that worries when he gets like this. He got popular, people loved him, when he was behind a hood and 23 years old and indestructible and poor as hell. Now he's older, more mature, looking down the barrel at thirty. That doesn't seem like such a milestone to a lot of folks, but he knows scores of people who didn't make it past 25. When so many people you played ball with, talked shit with, scammed folks with all get buried before thirty, it's hard for you to even visualize what life's supposed to be around then.

Did success make him soft? Did maturity? Joey wasn't wrong, his hits were not peppered. He detests softness. Detests the idea that success has robbed him of something that was vital to who he was.

But self destruction isn't his vibe..

Introspection really isn't either, but if he's given the two, he knows what he'll take.

So he thinks. Spends a lot of time alone, which works out, since Joey B has this pre-fight ritual stuff that he still does, something about “visualizing meditation”--some old Blackhawk stuff, probably. As much as Mike wants to call that a load of shit, he can't, not really. Time alone has given him time to sort himself out. He's finally keyed in on that one thing that he can't let go of. The one place where he can say to himself *“you fucked up, and it's on you--now do something about it.”*

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I think if there's one thing that stays fuckin' with your boy, it's that moment in Sia's garage.

Cause I doubted you.

Nah, fuck that, I *wrote your ass off*. Had a hearty laugh, and I wasn't the only one. Only Izzy warned me. Izzy told me, you're more than you seem. Izzy told me, don't just think you're gonna walk in and out and punch a card and be done with it.

She told me up and down it was mine to lose, and then I went and lost it, because I thought I was bulletproof.

Kinda still stings.

Guess that's pride fuckin' with me.

All that fight-mind shit that people like Robideau preach seems to leave out when you fuck up, y'know? Cause I feel washed, snuffed. Color went out of the sky. I put on a brave face, I know. Makes me miss my mask. No one could tell when I was sad, lonely, pissed, too zooted...now I'm here. Exposed. And I didn't really start feeling that way until now, 'cause up until now, it was a whole lot of success. And even when I did fail, it felt like small potatoes failure. Because it was just a match to win or lose—I got paid either way.

Then that belt came into my life.

That fucked up a lot of this Mikey Huevos, who gives a fuck vibe I'd been cultivating.

You feel it now too, don't you Remy? All the sudden you're just in deep, like falling in love head over heels. The first one, too. Hortense. Went to school with her brother. Smile could blind a dude, skin like butter pecan, I swear love you could smell her body spray a block away on a hot summer day. I would chase her like a dog after a bone. I woulda done anything for her, feel me? I woulda killed, that's a Fendi. Head over heels, got it bad, however you want to call it. I was a fiend for even a scrap of her attention.

That's what that championship is like. Fuck any of this "it ain't the top belt" shit,

too—any belt is the top belt if you're holding it.

Grizzly Adams knows what I'm talking about, he's probably held a few titles back when match results were yelled out by some kid after he said "Extra, extra!" waving a newspaper and shit.

Nah, that's unfair. I'm sure Oso is like god's gift to lucha libre, or at least he was back when people still bought...I dunno, what's an old brand of TV? Zenith. When people bought Zeniths. I'm not trying to discount you at all, not really. But how am I supposed to not see you as just an obstacle, right? You're a wall I have to break down so I can get what's mine, get what I've been dreaming of. So I'm not saying you're a non factor.

I'm saying that you're just someone to beat the fuck out of. I don;t hold no hate in my heart for you. None for Remy Garden, neither. Neither of you have done thing one to make me really hate you.

But if you try to keep me from that belt—try to keep me from my love?

Which, c'mon, we both know you're both gonna do.

Then I'll never forgive you. And I'll make sure you know it, too. Fist, foot, elbow. I'll *bury the both of you*—because *she's mine*.